

This Week in Congress

December 19, 2005

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." My next edition of this newsletter will be sent Friday, December 23, instead of Monday, December 26. I hope you find this newsletter useful.

People of Iraq Hold Historic Elections

On Thursday, the people of Iraq went to the polls to freely elect their government representatives under a new constitution. The success of nearly seventy percent of the country turning out to vote gives us hope for a better future for the Iraqi people and a more timely return home of U.S. troops. The election is a crucial step toward providing the political stability needed to defeat insurgents. This remarkable event is a tribute to the hard work and sacrifices of our servicemen and women in Iraq.

Success in Restoring Funding for Rural Health Care Programs

This week I was happy to announce success in restoring funding for rural health care to the annual appropriation for the Department of Health and Human Services. I was one of a handful of Republican members who voted against an earlier version of this legislation, insisting that rural health care needs could not be ignored.

Community Health Centers, rural health clinics and small rural hospitals are the backbone of the health care infrastructure across Kansas. This funding will be directed to medical research, training and education in rural areas, as well as support for rural health care facilities. Without federal funding in these rural areas, our ability to recruit, train and retain health professionals would be significantly reduced. Rural health professionals would also be less able to serve the most vulnerable segments of the population.

It is a challenge trying to make Washington politicians understand the struggles of rural America, but this is a positive step. I am pleased my rural health care concerns were heard and addressed by House leaders.

Supporting House Passage of Measures to Fight Methamphetamine

This week I supported House passage of legislation to combat methamphetamine production, trafficking and use. This passage sets a federal standard for addressing this epidemic on all levels across the country. It increases restrictions on obtaining the major ingredients used to produce meth, toughens criminal penalties against trafficking and smuggling, provides assistance to state and local agencies dealing with the epidemic and helps protect children from the harmful environment surrounding meth use and production.

Meth has been identified as the leading drug-related law enforcement problem in the country. The fight against meth has been on the Kansas radar for years, but the meth epidemic knows no state boundaries. Kansans are working hard to combat this drug and its production, but the majority of meth comes from across the border. By addressing the international supply, we will ultimately help efforts in communities across the nation.

House Passes Defense Funding for Troops and Other Measures

This morning the House passed the final version of funding legislation that supports our nation's military and includes other provisions, such as prohibiting the inhumane treatment of military detainees and authorizing oil exploration in the Alaskan Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

This legislation provides important benefits for America's servicemen and women by including a 3.1 percent pay raise, income replacement payments for Reservists serving on active duty and special pay for wounded service members during medical rehabilitation. In addition, the implementation for full concurrent receipt of veterans' disability compensation and military retired pay is accelerated to 2009, four years earlier than anticipated.

Funding for hurricane disaster assistance and avian flu preparedness was also approved. This additional spending is paid for in part by a one percent across-the-board reduction in all 2006 discretionary spending. Veterans' programs are excluded from this reduction. This comprehensive legislation is now under consideration in the Senate.

Houses Passes Legislation to Slow the Growth of Federal Spending

Early Monday morning, the House passed the final version of legislation to reduce the size of the federal deficit by about \$40 billion over the next five years. S. 1932, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, saves money by reforming future funding of federal mandatory entitlement programs. Currently, mandatory programs consume 54 percent of the total federal budget and this percentage is predicted to rise to 62 percent by 2015. This legislation will slow the growth of spending on mandatory entitlement programs by one-half of one percent over the next five years.

While nearly every federal program touches the lives of Americans, Congress must make responsible spending decisions. This final legislation is a result of several weeks of negotiations between members of the House and Senate and is significantly different from the version that originally passed the House in November. The Senate will now consider this legislation before it is signed into law by the President.

Strengthening Border Protection and Illegal Immigration Control

On Friday, the House passed H.R. 4437, the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005. This legislation tightens loopholes to prevent terrorists from crossing U.S. borders and strengthens current illegal immigration enforcement provisions. In addition, H.R. 4437 requires the mandatory detention of all illegal immigrants who are apprehended along U.S. borders until they are removed and requires businesses to verify the legal status of employees. The Senate is expected to consider immigration reform in 2006.

My top priority is the appropriate enforcement of laws already in place and the development of an immigration agency that protects our nation while operating in a fair, efficient and timely manner for those seeking legal entry into the United States.

Reviewing Posted County Prices at Agriculture Subcommittee Hearing

It has been brought to my attention by Kansas farmers that in the last few months the Posted County Prices (PCPs) do not accurately reflect the local cash market price in certain areas. PCPs are used to determine county level loan rates and Marketing Assistance Loan program benefits for commodities. The question is not whether it should be lower or higher, but whether or not the PCP accurately reflects the local market.

This week I chaired a hearing of the House Agriculture Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities and Risk Management to review the technical procedures associated with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) establishment of PCPs. USDA monitors and sets over 88,000 PCPs each day. USDA officials testified at the hearing, as well as several agricultural association representatives, including Greg Shelor of Minneola with the National Grain Sorghum Producers.

Farmers are already feeling the effects of higher input costs due to fuel and fertilizer costs and various natural disasters. I fear that any inaccuracy with PCPs may exacerbate the strain on our farmer's pockets. Our federal farm policies do not account for the input costs that our producers are experiencing now and I want to ensure that the programs we have in place to help our farmers do not inadvertently cause loss of revenue.

Opening of USDA Housing Office at Ft. Riley will Assist Soldier Homebuyers

I joined U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development State Director Chuck Banks, Major General Dennis Hardy, and Fort Riley and local area lenders this week for the ribbon cutting and open house of USDA's new Fort Riley Office. The office will be devoted to assisting the more than 7,500 soldiers and individuals relocating to the region during 2006 with their off-post homeownership needs. The office will support this expansion and the numerous rural communities in the region who could benefit from this economic development opportunity.

I am pleased to see that the USDA Rural Development is working so closely with Fort Riley. This is a large step toward meeting the housing component for our soldiers and families desiring to live in a home and enjoy a Kansas lifestyle.

Legislation Supporting Bostwick Irrigation Farmers Passes the House

Early this morning, legislation I introduced with Congressman Tom Osborne (R-NE) to assist farmers in four irrigation districts, two in Kansas and two in Nebraska, passed the House. The districts in Kansas include portions of Republic, Jewell, Rooks and Osborne Counties.

Farmers in these irrigation districts have paid for water they have not received. I recently testified before the House Resources Subcommittee on Water and Power to explain the need for H.R. 4000 and modifying payment contracts between the Bureau of Reclamation and the four irrigation districts - Kansas Bostwick Irrigation District No. 2, the Bostwick Irrigation District of Nebraska, the French-Cambridge Irrigation District and the Webster Irrigation District No. 4.

By equalizing the payments over the length of the current contract, H.R. 4000 will ease the burden on producers in Kansas and Nebraska who have been struggling to survive the financial hardship that five years of drought has brought the region. This legislation now awaits approval by the Senate.

From Hope to Paradise: Continuing First District Tour Stops

I continued my tenth annual county tour this week with stops in Ellsworth to walk down Douglas Avenue and in Sterling to join members and guests of the Rotary Club for their weekly lunch meeting. Also while in Sterling, I met with Sterling College President Bruce Douglas. Mr. Douglas and I discussed continuing efforts to promote higher education and the interests of Sterling College. I was greatly impressed with President Douglas, who is new to Kansas and Sterling College.

This Tuesday I will be visiting Alma in Wabaunsee County, Council Grove in Morris County and Junction City in Geary County. On Thursday I will make stops in Cawker City in Mitchell

County and Osborne in Osborne County. Friday morning I will spend time in WaKeeney in Trego County.

Meeting with New USDA Official

I chair the House Agriculture Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities and Risk Management, which has responsibility for crop insurance programs that are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency (RMA). President Bush recently appointed a new administrator for RMA, Eldon Gould. Mr. Gould came by my office this week so we could get acquainted and discuss a variety of crop insurance issues that affect Kansas farmers and American agriculture.

In the Office

Larry Dietz, Kenny Deutscher, Greg Trogstad and David Harding from WaKeeney and Kathy MacKenzie and Jim Davison from northern Virginia were in my office this week to discuss a proposal for a Veterans Community Center in WaKeeney. In to talk about farm policy and budget cuts was former Texas Congressman Larry Combest, who chaired the House Agriculture Committee for much of my time in Congress. Christin Flint of Emporia, a student at American University and a current intern in the office of Senator Pat Roberts, came by my office this week to meet with me. Also stopping in were John Howard with Kansas State University's International Grains Program, as well as Carolyn States of Hays, who is a member of Kansas

Farm Bureau, to talk about the importance of the agriculture industry.

Very truly yours,

Jerry